Konvolut O – the Dialectical Image of Gambling and Prostitution

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A question

In *Konvolut O,* one of Walter Benjamin's several files in his *Arcades* project, was he deliberately making a dialectical image, such that the collision between the gambler and the prostitute stopped time and illuminated not only these two activities, but also the ways of the city, its arcades, fate and destiny? If this was the case, then the shock of the collision can compel the viewer to take a second more detailed look at everyday life. For even though Benjamin believed in rational thought and revolutionary action of different forms, he was still embedded in the belief that there are certain spheres of life and activities over which we have minimum control. A key sentence in the konvolut draws attention to this:

> For in gambling hall and bordello, it is the same supremely sinful delight: to challenge fate in pleasure. (*Arcades*, O 1,1)

The goal of this essay is to simply read *Konvolut O* as a source of dialectical images brought on by the collision between these two activities.

Introduction

A strange combination for a dialectical image: gambling and prostitution? Benjamin talked of the past meeting the present in a dialectical image, where it was time that was the plane or horizon upon which the dialectical image sought expression, 'telescoping of the past through the present'. Dialectical images were for Benjamin, a way of directing attention towards on the one hand, the human faculty to make images, and on the other hand, the dialectical manner in which two or more opposing entities might be drawn together to bring about a shock with creative consequences.

Could it be that all the work invested in trying to find a master code to unlock the *Arcades* – witness Buck-Morss's often quoted *Dialectics of Seeing (1989)*, with its own master code hidden somewhat paradoxically in the title of her book [1] – has failed to see, or refused to admit, that Benjamin deposited or intended no such code? Maybe the answer is simple and available to anyone who takes a cursory glance thought the text. And, I am not thinking that a master code, or its remnants, are to be found in the very term or image of the Arcades, although it is clearly the case that the Arcades are important in Benjamin's conception and experience of urban society [2]. Maybe, and

[1] "He compels us to search for images of sociohistorical reality that are the key to unlocking the meaning of his commentary – just as that commentary is the key to their significance" (Buck-Morss, 1989: x) Or, as she later says in what must be her own version of the master code: 'the *Arcades* project develops a highly original philosophical method, one which might best be described as a dialectics of seeing'. (1989:6)

[2] The arcades, as Benjamin envisaged them were covered passageways, where different objects were exhibited. They could be understood as concrete, material metaphors, or rather allegoies, where Benjamin actually experienced the different *Konvolut* that he began to formulate in text and images as the *Aracdes* project he left behind upon his death. Such a perspective would mean that the *Arcades* project, as

this is the contention of this essay, Benjamin's *Arcades* was simply an experiment – which he never completed – of collecting and constructing a number of dialectical images for others to read in their own time, their time of the now.

This would make gambling and prostitution in *Konvolut O*, just one such dialectical image. That he arrives at such a combination is not surprising. The prostitute and the very question of the place of women in modern society had been a growing issue of importance from at least the time of Baudelaire in the mid-19th century. And, Benjamin's intense and detailed study of Baudelaire's life and poetry confirms the role of women as prostitutes and also as public figures in other different roles. It must also be noted that for Benjamin's generation, visiting prostitutes when a student or young person was not an unknown way of gaining sexual experience. Benjamin alludes to his own experiences in his essay, *Berlin Chronicle* (1979).

Today, fewer students would admit having visited or needing to visit prostitutes. Nevertheless, the continued existence of prostitution might also be connected with the view that love has become ever more debased in a modern world of conflicting obligations and desires. A world in which an increasingly number of our social relations have taken on an objectified, quantified and money-based character. Such a view would support the contention, to use Paz's words, that 'the prostitute is a caricature of love, a victim of love, a symbol of the powers that are debasing the world'. (Paz, 1961: 200)

Benjamin's view of the prostitute is clearly connected with such a view, namely that love has changed or is changing its character in an

text and images, had in fact a master code for Benjamin. This was based upon his experiences of urban life in passageways and places where commodities, both living and inorganic, were exhibited. I would however hesitate to reduce, or read all of the insights in the numerous *Konvoluten* of the *Arcades* in terms of this one metaphor or allegory, namely the arcade itself.

increasingly monetary-based direction. [3] And when this happens, it becomes possible to connect love and prostitution with other forms or expression of activities based upon money, such as gambling. This is surely Benjamin's strategy in *Konvolut O*, as he lets gambling become the accompanying element in his dialectical image with prostitution. Furthermore, the mediation and collision of prostitution with gambling through its monetary value, is not the only intention we can find in Benjamin's *Konvolut O*. The collision apparent in this dialectical image rests upon, or seeks its expression through several other mediating factors, which I shall highlight in what follows e.g. fate and destiny, dream, masks, fashion and so on.

In other words, fate and destiny, like monetary value, are seen to be shared common stages upon which prostitution and gambling are mediated and reveal themselves.

Part I: An overview of *Konvolut O*

Konvolut O: It consists of over 100 separate entries. They vary in length, from a sentence to a page, some are quotes from books Benjamin has obviously read, some are Benjamin's reflections on the topic prostitution or gambling, and some are a mixture of quotation and reflection. Benjamin has further catalogued and numbered the entries into groups of approximately the same kind of content so that the first five entries begin O 1,1 to O 1,5 and then the next five are

[3] I am to begin with reluctant to comment upon Wolff's (1989) view that Benjamin limited the number of public roles available to women in 19th century Paris. I would only assert that Benjamin's view of the woman and prostitutes was far from lacking in nuance – as many entries in the *Arcades* suggest – e.g. in *Konvolut P* and *Konvolut O*

O 1a,1 to O 1a,5 followed by entries O 2,1 to O 2,5 and so on. Sometimes Benjamin breaks this grouping in five rule. Most of the authors are from the mid-19th century, although his citations and reflections on the psychoanalysis of gambling and gamblers are from the 1920s and 1930s. Below I have constructed a summary of the first two groups of entries to give the reader an idea of Benjamin's strategy.

Table: *Konvolut O* – some contents

Entry numbers	Main topics	Detail	Author quoted and/or Benjamin(WB) reflections
O 1,1 to O1,5	Fate, gambling and Prostitution	Fate, aristocrats, bourg., public morality	Gronow, WB, Hase
O 1a,1 to O 1a,5	Prostitution	Female morality: displayed in Arcades	Castel, Torca, Aragon, Hessel, WB
O 2, 1 to O 2, 5	Prostitutes, one gambling entry	Masks: nature motherhood, respectability	von Gall, WB, Vischer, Dubech and Espezel
O 2a,1to O 2a, 5	Prostitutes and gambling	Thresholds: brothels and gambling houses	Aragon and WB, Dubech and Espezel, Goudon

If the entries of the whole *Konvolut* are read in greater detail and one searches for common themes it is possible to identify 6 dialectical images – something which Benjamin did not do for the reader - where gambling and prostitution collide directly in the same entry, or the reader is induced to make the connection between entries through a shared mediating factor, what I would call the stage for the encounter. They are as follows:

1. Fate and destiny, including everything from fortune telling to superstition and the appeal to God.

2. Fashion attire for gamblers and prostitutes, or in more general terms, the questions of masks to give an impression of respectability and propriety

3. Dream, and more generally the dream of winning or fulfilling sexual desire

4. Psycho-analysis, where conceptions rooted in Freudianism are applied most directly to gambling, and less so to prostitution.

5. Stocks and markets, or in more general terms commodification and monetary value

6. Time and most importantly, *Erlebnis.*

Part II: Six dialectical images of prostitution and gambling

1. Fate and Destiny

In the first entry in *Konvolut O,* prostitution and gambling are mediated through fate and destiny. The occasion is the gambler who leaves the casino and re-encounters the same situation of chance in the

arcade – they are called upon to decide upon which prostitute to approach. Benjamin interrupts his narrative to weave in a reflection upon fate and challenging God. A long citation is necessary:

> ...and doesn't he transform the arcade into a casino, into a gambling den, where now and again he stakes the red, blue, yellow *jetons* of feeling on women, on a face that suddenly surfaces (will it return his look?), on a mute mouth (will it speak?)?...He leaves the Palais- Royal with bulging pockets, calls to a whore, and once more celebrates in her arms the communion with number, in which money and riches, absolved from every earthen weight, have come to him from the fates like a joyous embrace returned to the full. For in gambling hall and bordello, it is the same supremely sinful delight: to challenge fate in pleasure...The origin of true lechery is nothing else but this stealing of pleasure from out of the course of life with God, whose covenant with such life resides in the name. The name itself is the cry of naked lust. This sober thing, fateless in itself – the name – knows no other adversary than the fate that takes its place in whoring and that forges its arsenal in superstition. Thus in gambler and prostitute that superstition which arranges the figures of fate and fills all wanton behaviour with fateful forwardness, fateful concupiscence, bringing even pleasure to kneel before its throne. (Benjamin, O 1, 1)

Benjamin is saying that prostitution and gambling are activities that make it possible to challenge fate through the pursuit of pleasure. Or put differently, whoring and gambling are ways in which wanton behaviour (– without restraint, dissolute) and concupiscence (– unlawful desire) take the place of God in determining a person's fate. He is not reducing the one to the other in this observation. Instead, a certain shared characteristic is illuminated.

Is Benjamin correct? This entry might be an attempt by Benjamin to

find a secular image of fate, something which, is arguably most evident in the act of prostitution. But also, a secular image of fate is something in which, the gambler can also attempt to partake. And note, pleasure is not seen in Freudian terms, as will be the case towards the end of the konvolut (O 11, 2), when he regards the pleasure of gambling as capable of over-winning the reality principle found in work and everyday life.

However, even if fate and destiny (- Benjamin often conflates the two in this konvolut) are viewed in secular terms and capable of over-winning reality without becoming sacred and under the hand of God, this is not to mean that the gambler or even the prostitute can guarantee when and where the peculiar feeling of happiness will arrive. The happiness, which is more than simply winning or experiencing an orgasm, can 'come to him from the fates like a joyous embrace returned to the full'. (O 13, 4) Fate is then the arrival of the unexpected. On the other hand, this does not mean that the gambler or prostitute will not try to gain a glimpse of their fate:

> Are fortune telling cards more ancient than playing cards? Does the card game represent a pejoration of divinatory techniques? Seeing the future is certainly crucial in card games, too. (O 13a, 2)

Konvolut O contains other examples of the dialectical image of gambling and prostitution mediated through different forms of secular and sacred fate and destiny.

2. Fashion

Benjamin provides a number of entries on the prostitute's interest in fashion and displaying themselves in the Parisian arcades. Along with his noting the gambler's interest in fashion, it means that prostitution and gambling become a dialectical image mediated by their common interest in fashion.

> More on the mania for masks: 'We know from the statistics on prostitution that the fallen woman takes a certain pride in being deemed by nature still worthy of motherhood – a feeling that in no way excludes her aversion to the hardship and disfigurement that goes along with this honor. She thus willingly chooses a middle way to exhibit her condition: she keeps it "for two months, for three months," naturally not longer.' (Vischer, quoted in Benjamin, O 2,2)

That the prostitute desires to hide their profession is not surprising, when many are skeptical of it. Less understandable for the reader is why Benjamin presents several entries on the popularity of the shawl as an article of fashion. Take for example the following from 1823:

> ...designs imitating the flowers of nature...The demand for these kinds of shawls is enormous...They were sold before being made...This brilliant period of shawls, the golden age of manufacture did not last long, yet in France it resulted in a virtual goldmine...(Rey, quoted by Benjamin, O 8a,2)

But, here is up to the reader to understand how the shawl might also be an article used by the prostitute to mask the lack of respectability of their occupation, in addition to heightening their alluring attractiveness.

Then, there is of course the question of dialectical images – drawing together different entities (gambling and prostitution) to create a shock or estrangement. Could it be that gamblers also desire to hide their activity? Benjamin mentions no connection between gambling, shawls and prostitution, and yet it is not unreasonable to ask if the entry on a gambler returning home late at night, creating a disturbance outside his home, and swiftly removed by a municipal guardsman, is presented by Benjamin to show us the gambler who has lost his shawl of respectability? For is it not the case, that both gambling and prostitution desire their mask of respectability, one with the shawl and one with the gambler's desire to enter their own house at night without upsetting

neighbourhood's image of them as respectable:

> The adventure of the municipal guardsman on horseback, placed like a fetish at the door of a gambler down on his luck, has remained in the annals of our circle...at around one o'clock in the morning, the sad victim of the green tables returned...He rings the bell; no one comes...Impatient, irritated...the tenant smashes a pane of glass...the municipal guardsman stoops down, seizes the troublemaker by the collar...(Gourdon, quoted by Benjamin, O 3,3)

The gambler's mask is more clearly evident in the 'fashion' in which they choose to gamble. To gamble in an aristocratic fashion is to show an apparent disinterest in the sums won and lost. Count Hunyday's mask was evident to his valet who saw the following day how his master's nails,

> 'had dug into the flesh of his chest as the game was taking a dangerous turn'. (Gronow, quoted by Benjamin. O 1, 2)

The prostitute and the gambler generate a second dialectical image in their common desire for masks of respectability. That they seek to do it different ways must not disguise how they are both dependent upon fashioning their own masks.

3. The dream house

In one entry the reader encounters Aragon, 'how mankind loves to remain transfixed at the very doors of the imagination'. Benjamin dwells upon the observation that *rites de passage* ceremonies, such as those associated with death, birth, marriage, puberty and so on have become 'ever more unrecognizable and impossible to experience'. These are threshold experiences, not thought of as boundaries, but as passages into new zones of experience. Falling asleep and waking are

such threshold experiences, and they are found in the love's sexual permutations. Still the reason for the Aragon quote seems to the reader unclear. But, Benjamin ends entry O 2a, 1 with two words: Dream House. This is the necessary clue.

For Benjamin the two words are placed in rubrics and are a direction to at least two other konvolut, L and K, with the titles: Dream House, Museum, Spa and Dreamed City, Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung. The latter, *Konvolut K*, with danger of being superficial, deals with the importance of waking up and becoming conscious and its opposite. The former, *Konvolut L*, deals more with the material realisation of our dreams in architectural creations. The key point in our context is that in *Konvolut O*, the bordello becomes one dream house, where different sexual permutations of love are staged and realised. The bordello, brothel - whatever name is chosen - is a place where the visitor and client can cross a threshold into a world of lived sexual dreams i.e. to open the doors of the imagination, as intimated by Aragon.

Four entries later in *Konvolut O*, Benjamin is talking of gambling, and there seems to be no obvious, stated connection with prostitution or dream houses. But, O 3, 1 quotes from Gourdon's description of some early 19th century Parisian gambling establishments:

> The establishments were managed by...hideous-looking old women, disgraceful remnants of every vice... (Gourdon, quoted in Benjamin, 1999: 495)

The women in question have clearly been prostitutes earlier in life. Now they run a different kind of dream house – the one where gamblers dream of winning fortunes ('that bouncing ball holds within it acres of good land...treasures of art, marvels of taste, jewels of price, the most exquisite bodies in all the world, nay! even souls - souls no one ever dreamed... - France, quoted by Benjamin O 4,a). What Benjamin is doing is getting the reader to imagine prostitutes in

bordellos, then to imagine their presence in gambling houses. Mediating the connection of gambling and prostitutes as a dialectical image is in this case their housing and being housed in places for sexual dreams and dreams of winning. At times the two activities are kept separate, each in their own dream house. At times they are in the same dream house. Benjamin notes without comment, that the second floor of the Palais-Royal gambling establishment housed 'high-class *femmes perdue*'; in other words prostitutes. (O 3a, 2)

4. Psycho-analysis

In all entries in the konvolut Benjamin talks of gambling as the 'noblest of all passions, because it comprehends all others'. (O 2a, 5) He connects this passion for gambling with a sense of pleasure:

> A series of lucky rolls gives me more pleasure than a man who does not gamble can have over a period of several years...I have spiritual pleasures, and I want no others. (Gourdon, quoted by Benjamin O 2a, 5)

But the kind of pleasure to which Benjamin is drawing attention is not merely of a spiritual character. Much later in the konvolut he quotes from two writers in the 192Os and 193Os. They describe gambling from a psycho-analytical perspective. Bergler regards gambling as the realisation of the pleasure principle and the aggressive desire for omnipotence (O 11, 2) Formerly repressed desires are re-enacted. What undoubtedly attracts Benjamin in this view is that the gambler publicly exhibits their sexual desires through gambling, just as the flâneur or the prostitute are able to walk the streets and arcades.

To this passion, pleasure and aggression nexus he draws upon the work of Ernst Simmel and the time of re-creation. (O 11a, 1) The gambler

endlessly faces the choice between two colours, just as their sexuality originates in the choice between the two parental figures. It is also the view that the gambler can endlessly re-create themselves – as both the father and mother figure. Benjamin himself was a heavy gambler and this displeased his own father, so he was not therefore unfamiliar with the implications of Freudian inspired *mother - father - child* triads and their repressive influence.

I think it is the demonstrative, exhibitionist sides of gambling which are the key to Benjamin's psycho-analytic image of gambling. The tendency towards the exhibition of desire is the mediating factor generating the dialectical image with prostitution - the prostitute who is to be found on the streets and in the arcades. But, what Benjamin doesn't do, is suggest that the prostitute finds pleasure in her occupation, as does the gambler. There is no talk of the 'happy whore'. (Skilbrei, 1997: 30) This is one of the typical blanks left for the reader to imagine or refuse to imagine.

5. Monetary value and commodification

That gambling and prostitution are to do with money comes as no surprise; it must be expected that it mediates a dialectical image between gambling and prostitution. What becomes interesting is the manner in which Benjamin chooses to do this.

Alluding to conversations with Brecht (O 11a, 3) he suggests that the bourgeoisie in particular are experiencing a crisis in sexuality and love. Could this be a reflection of the general commodification of all relations in society, with the consequence that it becomes more difficult to love others, sexually or otherwise, in non-monetary terms? This seems to be his conclusion. Hence the following:

> Love for the prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity. (O 11a, 4)

Commentators such as Buck-Morss (1986) have charged that Benjamin objectifies the prostitute as the female equivalent of the flâneur, thereby blocking for the entry of a subjectifying woman's voice in public life. There maybe some truth in this allegation, but Benjamin elsewhere in the Arcades, in *Konvolut P* for example, quotes Claire Démar's views on the need to emancipate women from the prostitution of women's desires in marriage.

The connection of prostitution with gambling is mediated through their dependency on the market. While it is the competition between prostitutes that influences their market price, Benjamin's interest with respect to gambling is with those professional gamblers, namely those working on the stock exchange who are 'playing the market'. (O 4, 1) He draws attention to the those around the gambling tables, who are *professors of argot* . They sell their advice on betting, just like stock brokers advising investors. (O 3a, 1)

The prostitute and gambler are here a dialectical image mediated by the manner in which they react to the commodification of their services. What they share in common is the awareness that they belong to their own respective markets.

6. Time and *Erlebnis*

Most students of Benjamin have come across his conception of the dialectical image and its relation to the time of the present as the mediating factor. Take the following illustrations he provides in a different *Arcades Konvolut*, N, the one to do with knowledge:

> The dialectical image is a lightning flash. The Then must be held fast as it flashes its lightning image in the Now of recognizability. The rescue that is thus - and only thus - effected, can only take place for that which, in the next moment, is already lost. (N 9,7)

> Telescoping of the past through the present. (N 7a, 3)

> The materialist presentation of history leads the past to place the present in a critical condition. (N 7a, 5)

Benjamin's point is that things just keep on going in the same manner as before, and this is the catastrophe (9a,1). The ever same is the problem, hence his interest in the dimension of time and stopping it in lightning flashes of recognition. In such moments change can be effected and the person's experience of time changes in character. It becomes historically important time, what he calls *erfahrung*. This is in contra-distinction to the experience of time which has the character of the ever same. This kind of time he terms *erlebnis*. This two part dichotomy of the experience of time is found in his second essay on Baudelaire from the 3Os, but it also plays a central role in his conception of the gambler, as illustrated in *Konvolut O*. Here his concern is with *Erlebnis*, rather than *Erfahrung*

Benjamin charges that gambling entails a certain intensification of the moment. It collects 'into a single instant the emotions dispersed throughout the slow-moving existence of ordinary men, the secret of living a whole lifetime in a few minutes – in a word, the genie's ball of thread'. (Anatole France, quoted by Benjamin O4a) Moreover, this focus on the moment yields a certain intoxication. As he himself puts it, undoubtedly speaking from his own experience:

> Such intoxication depends on the peculiar capacity of the game to provoke presence of mind through the fact that, in rapid succession, it brings to the fore constellations which work – each one wholly independent of the others – to summon up in every instance a thoroughly new original reaction from the gambler. (O 12a, 2)

The gambler is therefore interested in moments rather than in their linked connection. This has important consequences for the individual's participation in history. For they no longer believe in its

progression. It becomes quite simply the ever same. An experience of *Erlebnis* as the isolated experience (O 12a, 1).

Benjamin does not say directly that the prostitute experiences time as *Erlebnis*. But, such a conclusion is not hard to draw when Benjamin reflects 'they are not women – they are nights'. (O 3, 5) In other words, the prostitute is the source of intensely felt experiences of *Erlebnis* – an intensification heightened by the fact that they are often visited at night.

Part III: Contemporary implications and images

My contention has been that for Benjamin prostitution and gambling generate a number of dialectical images. Each image is staged, or as I have termed it mediated by such events as their monetary value, their experience of time, fashioning oneself through masks of respectability and so on. What makes these images dialectical is that they are mediated in different ways, so that the dream house of the bordello does not always coincide with the dream house of the gambling establishment. On occasions however, there are overlaps or syntheses.

For Benjamin, the gambler or punter is usually a man and the prostitute a woman. One way of applying his images to our time of the now, would be to investigate those instances in which the woman is a gambler and the man a prostitute. For example, female gambling practices are often more public in different arenas, such as with respect to the culture of bingo and male prostitutes have their own cultures and accompanying public spheres.

One avenue of investigation would be to construct a dialectical image drawing together not gambling and prostitution, but drugs and prostitution. This connection has been followed by a number of recent police research documents in England. (May et a., 1999) But, the risk of such a strategy is that it develops a pathological and deviant view of the

two activities. This was never Benjamin's (1979) intention. His explorations of drug taking were more for research reasons, to deepen his understanding and experience of urban reality. His reflections on taking hashish are a case in point.

A fertile use of Benjamin's insight into the dialectical image of gambling and prostitution can rest in his focus on the public role of the two activities and their quality of 'exhibitionicity', to adopt a term from Joyce (1992). Could it be that *Konvolut O* is for the reader quite simply a handbook providing advice on how to carry oneself with decorum or propriety when participating in these two activities? What Goffman would call the necessary demeanour of acting in the situation with 'smoothness, and aplomb, expressing self-control and poise'. (Goffman, 1967: 81) The test of such a thesis is of course to experience gambling or prostitution in today's society.

Konvolut O would become then a series of dialectic images illuminating not only the practices of gambling and prostitution, but providing additionally a source of counsel capable of socialising a person into these activities. The giving of advice was a task close to Benjamin's heart, and I would like to close this short essay with Cicero's reflection on decorum:

> ...what is fitting and agreeable to an occasion or person; it is important in actions as well as in words, in the expression of the face, in gesture and in gait, and impropriety has the opposite effect...(Cicero, 1971: 361)

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Tensions between Europe and the USA: A Long-Term Perspective

Stephen Mennell

> 'America can always be relied upon to do the right thing, after it has tried all the alternatives.' Winston Churchill

A long-term project to write a book entitled *The American Civilising Process*, intended to view the history of the USA in the light of Norbert Elias's theory of civilising processes, has suddenly become alarmingly topical. Several disasters have befallen the USA and the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century: the election as President (or rather non-election according to current international standards for the conduct of democratic elections) of the inadequate George W. Bush; the terrible events of 11 September 2001, which focused the sympathy of the world on America; and the Bush administration's catastrophic reaction to them, including the invasion of Iraq, which utterly alienated that sympathy and made the USA – the American regime, that is, not necessarily American people – more widely hated across the world than ever before. In particular, events have precipitated overt tensions between the USA and many of its supposed allies in Western Europe unprecedented since the Second World War. This paper, drawn from drafts of various parts of my eventually forthcoming book, is intended to put these tensions in long-term perspective